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SUBJECT: PM MALIKI OPENS NAJAF INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT IN
GRAND FASHION

Classified By: PRT Team Leader Angus Simmons for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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11. (U) This is a PRT Najaf reporting cable.

12. (C) SUMMARY. On July 20, Prime Minister Maliki made an inaugural flight to Najaf International Airport (NIA) in a ceremony widely attended by Shia political and religious elite from the Middle Euphrates region. NIA is not yet open for business and is still some months from gaining full certification with the Iraq Civil Aviation Authority (ICAA). It is, however, well established on a trajectory toward that goal due to positive coordination between airfield operational management provider Al Aqeeq Aviation, their subcontracted security services provider Global Strategies Group, Inc., and Najaf's political leadership, namely Governor Asaad Abu Gelal and Deputy Governor Abtan. MNC-I DCG MajGen Lefebvre, MND-C DCG-S COL Smith, and Team Leader (TL) spoke representing the USG and were accorded a warm welcome. Governor Asaad told TL that the marja,iya (i.e. Grand Ayatollah Sistani) were very pleased, and made a point of emphasizing the U.S. had provided strong support for the opening of the airport. END SUMMARY

A Who,s Who of Najaf, Minus Sadr and Iran

13. (C) Prime Minister Maliki arrived in a ceremonial Iraqi Airways flight from Baghdad to open NIA. The carefully constructed but endearingly chaotic ceremony was attended by over 2,000, including the following dignitaries: the Ministers of Transportation and Oil, ISCI deputy Sayed Ammar al Hakim, Ahmad Chalabi, governors from Diyala, Babil, Diwaniyah, and Karbala (all ISCI or Da'wa), CoR members, Ulum Bakr Sadr and a large number of prominent members of the marja,iya and hawza, Najaf Mosque speaker Sheikh al Qubbannji, the Najaf Provincial Council, numerous influential tribal sheikhs, and business, political, and international guests. The entire PRT received invitations and attended en masse. In a welcome twist, Iraqis accidentally sat in the PRT,s designated seating area, releasing the PRT staff into the crowd as normal members of the ceremony. Hussein Abu Gelal, son of the governor (and fluent English speaker) told PRT Off that OMS representatives and leaders were conspicuously absent, despite specific invitations from Abu Gelal and Abtan. No Iranian government or business representatives were noted at the ceremony.

14. (C) In his remarks, the Prime Minister expressed his full support to see NIA completed in the shortest possible time. He noted that the GOI would soon be working in earnest on the Central Euphrates Airport (a green field project that may take 6-10 years to realize) that will serve all four provinces of south central Iraq. Maliki departed the ceremony to visit Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani and returned to lunch at the airport with Governor Abu Gelal, Team Leader, and airport and provincial officials. Governor Abu Gelal and Hussein informed PRT Offs the meeting with Sistani went extraordinarily well. Sistani gave PM Maliki two rings, which reportedly he does in rare cases and indicates good

favor and approval.

The Mechanics of Opening NIA

15. (C) The ICAA cleared four fixed-wing flights for the opening of the ceremony, including support flights chartered from Skylink and Gryphon by Global Strategies and Al Aqeeq respectively. (Global is also the primary security provider for Baghdad International Airport.) During the first support flight that brought Global's security team in from Baghdad one day prior to the official ceremony, approximately four hundred Iraqis gathered at the airport, including press, to commemorate the first flight in Najaf. Some in the (heavily pro-ISCI) crowd wept openly and even paraded Deputy Governor Abtan on their shoulders in celebration. The ceremony itself featured the Iraqi Airways flight that transported the PM, and also a chartered Gryphon Air jet that brought Al Aqeelah executives, Kuwait government representatives and senior businessmen, and other gulf country dignitaries.

16. (C) Before opening for business, NIA still needs to finalize its full security master plan and airport operations plan in order to gain certification. To complete this task and to set up long-term operations, Global is constructing a 500-person camp, and Al Aqeelah will add an additional 300-person facility. Skylink was also present during the ceremonies and appears poised to negotiate some kind of avgas support agreement for the airport. Not all Iraqis are content with the timing of the ceremony or the fast schedule for airport certification. PC member and tourism committee chair Sheikh Fayed Al Shimmeri expressed concern that Deputy

BAGHDAD 00002299 002 OF 002

Governor Abtan had been &rushing8 the airport to completion and wanted to ensure that everything was done in accord with required international standards.

Comment

17. (C) Comment: The opening of this airport is an emotional and landmark event in South-Central Iraq. It provided an opportunity for something that has been all too rare in recent years) a large public gathering of Iraq,s political leadership including national and local politicians, sheikhs, the marja,iya, and business leaders meeting and celebrating.

Not surprisingly the event received heavy positive media coverage. The continued success of the airport as it comes online will employ many hundreds more and allow millions of tourists, religious pilgrims, and businessmen to travel to Najaf, some for the first time in their lives. The province and the PRT view NIA as the cornerstone of Najaf,s investment and economic plan. Al Aqeelah Investments, the parent firm of Al Aqeeq, will engage in an even more ambitious project, constructing residential and business communities as part of the multi-billion dollar New Najaf City project.

18. (C) Comment, Cont.: The PRT and USG role in the opening of the NIA reflect precisely what such roles should be in a province under Iraqi control (PIC). The PRT worked closely with Deputy Governor Abtan, Najaf Reconstruction Committee Chair Haider Mayalli, and Airport Chief Engineer Karim Al Abdaly over the past few months, with accelerated cooperation closer to the ceremony itself. PRT Transportation Advisor even accompanied the Najaf delegation to Kuwait to come to contractual agreement with the NIA,s general manager, Al Aqeeq, and security subcontractor Global. In the lead up to the ceremony, MND-C committed air assets, security assistance, and use of FOB Endeavor to ensure Global,s expat staff safely and efficiently set up at the heretofore unsecured airport site. We will be moving ahead next week to facilitate a meeting in Baghdad between Deputy Governor Abtan, the ICAA, and the Office of the Transportation Advisor to discuss the way forward on the airport certification

process and what needs to be accomplished to achieve the commencement of regular flights. For the PRT and the province of Najaf, the coordination that brought about this long-awaited airport opening ceremony may well offer a glimpse of what success in Iraq will look like. End Comment.
CROCKER